2003-04 Warm Water Fish Management Activity Report

REGION 5 (Billings)

ANITA RESERVOIR

Anita has been severely impacted by the ongoing drought. It is part of the Huntley Irrigation System and has been almost totally dewatered during the irrigation season. Anita is scheduled to receive a plant of 10,000 largemouth bass each year, but these plants have been canceled the past four years due to lack of water, and the plant will likely be canceled again this summer.

ARAPOOISH POND

Continuing low flows in the Bighorn River have negatively impacted water levels in Arapooish Pond the past several years. The pond suffered a complete winterkill in 2000-2001 when the aeration system shut down due to a power outage. Arapooish was restocked with 9,000 largemouth bass in 2001 and again in 2003. These fish apparently made it through this past winter, and should be large enough to provide some good fishing this summer. Based on past experience with this pond, some of the 2001-year class could spawn this spring.

BIGHORN LAKE

Bighorn Lake has been severely impacted by drought conditions since lake levels started dropping in early 2000. The lake set new record low lake levels in 2000, 2001, and 2002 before showing a slight rebound in 2003, partially due to record low releases into the Bighorn River. Low water levels severely limited boat access to Bighorn Lake in 2002. The National Park Service took advantage of the low water levels to extend the boat ramps at both Ok-a-Beh and Barry's Landing by the spring of 2003, and the reservoir was open to boating all summer. Unless inflows improve dramatically, water levels may drop below these extended ramps before the recreation season really gets started this summer.

Both forage and game fish populations appear to be suffering with the low water levels. No electrofishing was conducted on the reservoir in the spring of 2003 due to lack of boat access during the walleye spawn. Six gill nets set at standard sites in the lower reservoir in the spring of 2003 captured 9 walleyes, 1 sauger, 1 smallmouth bass, 3 channel catfish and a few nongame species. River carpsuckers were the most common fish captured. Four nets set in the upper reservoir in early summer 2003 captured 3 walleyes, 1 smallmouth bass and one channel catfish. Again river carpsuckers were the dominant fish in the catch. Six standard net sets in the lower reservoir in the fall of 2003 captured only 6 walleyes, 1 sauger, 1 smallmouth bass, 1 channel catfish, and 8 brown trout. Two nights of electrofishing near the dam this spring captured 41 walleyes. Only 11 of these were mature fish. The largest walleye captured was 26 in long and weighed 6.4 lb. A large number of smallmouth bass were captured including a

good distribution of sizes. The largest bass netted weighed 2.3 lb and was 16.4 in long. The smallmouth fishing should be good in Bighorn Lake this summer, if anglers can put a boat in the water.
Bighorn Lake is scheduled to receive plants of 4 million walleye fry and 200,000 walleye fingerlings each year. Thanks to the creative and hard work of the Fort Peck crew and volunteers, this plant request has been met each year through the drought. The 2004 fry were planted on May 3rd.

BROADVIEW RESERVOIR

Broadview remains dry, and no fisheries management is planned until water returns to the area.

COONEY RESERVOIR

The walleye fishery in Cooney Reservoir continues to provide excellent angling, despite recent low reservoir levels. Netting in the fall of 2003 and shocking in the spring of 2004 suggest that the population is remaining relatively stable even though the stocking rate was decreased from 100,000 to 50,000 fingerlings three years ago. There are still many large fish in the 10 lb range in the reservoir, although fewer trophy fish (>14 lb) were captured this past year. Another indication that the fishery is thriving in the reservoir is that for the first time in many years, many walleye in the 14-23 in range were captured in both the nets and with electrofishing. These medium-sized fish are highly sought after for their eating quality, and the recent increase in their numbers should provide for even better walleye fishing at Cooney.

DEADMANS BASIN RESERVOIR

The entire Musselshell Drainage has been suffering from drought for over 6 years resulting in low water conditions in Deadmans for the past several years. Despite the low water, the fishery in Deadmans is surviving and actually doing fairly well. Limited numbers of tiger muskies were stocked into Deadmans Basin in 1998, 1999, and 2000 in hopes of establishing a biological control on the large sucker population in the lake while providing a secondary warmwater trophy fishery. Netting results indicate the tiger muskies have significantly reduced the sucker population in Deadmans over the past couple of years, and the trout fishery has responded favorably. The average size of rainbows in Deadmans has increased significantly, and anglers have been reporting good trout fishing both through the ice and on into this spring.

There is a lot of interest in the tiger muskie fishery in Deadmans, and anglers are catching a few fish. One tiger muskie captured in a gill net last spring was 32.8 in long and weighed 9.35 lb. Four tiger muskies were captured during netting last fall. These fish ranged from 34.0 in to 38.0 in with the largest one weighing 14.4 lb. Three tiger muskies were captured in nets pulled May 11, 2004. These fish ranged from 35.0 in to 38.5 in, and the largest was 17.5 lb. The new regulations raised the minimum legal size for tiger muskie to 40 in, and

there should be some legal fish in Deadmans by late this summer. Plans are to stock a few more tiger muskies into Deadmans this year if they are available.

MUSSELSHELL RIVER

Despite multiple years of drought, there are still some fish surviving in the lower Musselshell River. Last August, 31 seine hauls were made at 13 different sites on the Musselshell between Barber and Melstone. Much of this section of river has been dewatered during the last several years, but the seining still captured 15 different species of fish including 12 native species. Only two game species were captured. Channel catfish were collected at 3 sites while smallmouth bass were captured at 8 of the 13 sites. Anglers continue to report good smallmouth fishing in the Musselshell when there is water.

OTHER PONDS

Fisheries have been lost in almost all of the small private bass ponds managed in Region 5 as a result of ongoing drought. We continue to monitor water conditions and will restock these ponds as soon as conditions allow.

Lake Josephine. Lake Josephine continues to be the most consistent largemouth bass pond in Region 5, producing some nice bass. Lake Josephine is stocked with 10,000 largemouth bass every other year to supplement natural reproduction because of the large number of small panfish in the lake that prey on young bass. Stunted crappie, yellow perch and sunfish populations are abundant in the lake at times and provide some recreation for young anglers. An illegal introduction of bluegill, first documented in 2000, appears to have successfully established a new population. This introduction will increase competition in an already overpopulated lake, increase stunting of all fish in the lake, and may make it more difficult to maintain the bass fishery. A 30 in northern pike was also netted from Lake Josephine in 2003. Northerns have never been legally planted into Lake Josephine, so this had to be another illegal introduction.

Lake Elmo. Rainbow trout have become the most popular game fish in Lake Elmo since they were first planted in 1998, but Lake Elmo continues to support stunted populations of crappie, yellow perch and sunfish that attract mostly young anglers. Lake Elmo is stocked annually with approximately 7,800 channel catfish, and these fish grow well. Reports of anglers catching catfish over 10 lb from Lake Elmo are fairly common, and an 11.4 lb catfish was captured in a gill net last fall.

Nelsons Pond. A wild fish transfer of crappie from Lake Josephine in Billings to a small farm pond near Luther occurred during the summer of 2003. This pond is accessible to the public by contacting the Billings Regional Office. The success of the transplant has not yet been evaluated, but if successful it should provide an excellent opportunity for kids to catch crappie locally.